



## BRITISH ARMY RECORDS – PRE-1900

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How you find army records for an ancestor depends on several factors. This presentation examines the various factors, and then lays a basic background for understanding army records. The factors to understand include time period, rank, corps, wars & campaigns, and filing or organization of the records.

### STRATEGIES IN HOW TO RESEARCH BRITISH ARMY RECORDS

Specific events in history affected the keeping and organization of records. If you know what was going on in the British Army at the time your ancestor served, it may simplify the task of finding him. This includes various wars (see wars & campaigns, below), as well as changes in record keeping. In early British history, armies were raised as needed and disbanded as the conflict ended. In 1660, the Restoration of the Monarchy led to establishment of the first standing army, which has continued to this day. However, it was 1760 before any uniform method of record keeping commenced. Thus, most military records do not exist before 1760. In 1816, many regiments were disbanded as the Napoleonic Wars came to an end. Prior to 1847, attestation (enlistment) was for life. In 1854, the Board of Ordnance was merged into the War Office (see Corps, below).

**Rank.** The basic distinction is commissioned officers are totally separate from soldiers (which includes non-commissioned officers). Officers were commissioned, while soldiers attested (or enlisted). Searches for officers are undertaken totally separate from searches for soldiers. If you are uncertain which applies to your ancestor, you may need to do two separate searches.

**Corps.** The army includes several separate corps. The major divisions are infantry (or foot) and cavalry (or lancers or hussars). However, before 1854, engineers, sappers and miners, and artillery were part of the Board of Ordnance and were separate corps of the army. Thus, they have separate records (which have since been assigned separate WO class numbers) until 1854. Regiments had various men assigned to the regiment who were not considered part of the same corps (whether infantry or cavalry) - Medical personnel belonged to the Medical Corps, Chaplains were a separate corps, and the quartermaster (Quartermaster General) and paymaster (Paymaster General), though assigned to a specific regiment, are not normally included in the records of that regiment.

**Wars & campaigns.** Some records, notably medals, are often filed by campaign. A war may have several campaigns involved before the final peace treaty. Several regiments may be assigned to a campaign, which may last several months. Medals for participation in that campaign are filed by the name of the campaign. Because so many new regiments were created during World War I, records of service 1914-1920 are filed together for the war, as were the records of the Boer War in South Africa (since mostly destroyed by fire).

**Filing or organization of the records.** Many records were originally filed by regiment. However, some records have been filed in some other way. For example, medals and awards are filed by campaign and/or type of medal. From 1822, pension records are filed by district office to which the pensions were sent (usually where the pensioner lived). Even when filed by regiment, a soldier may have transferred from one regiment to another. His description book would be filed under the regiment he first joined, but his attestation and discharge are filed under the regiment he was in when he left the army. From 1872, soldiers' documents were organized by corps instead of by regiment, and since 1881, have been filed in one alphabetical series for the whole army, although World War One (WWI-1914-1918) is in its own series.

## **BRITISH RECORDS ARMY RECORDS – BACKGROUND**

Only about 15% of the male population served in the army but families that were affected by having husband, brother or uncle in the service were close to 50%. By far the vast majority of those who served did so as "foot soldiers". The major challenge to finding records of is to ascertain their regiment name or number.

**Commissioned Officers** – the few:

- 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant (Cornet/Ensign)
- Captain
- Major
- Lieutenant Colonel
- Colonel
- General

**Non-commissioned Officers:**

- Lance Corporal
- Corporal
- Serjeant
- Colour- or Master-serjeant

**Soldiers**

- the 'regular' foot soldier/army (the many)
  - Private

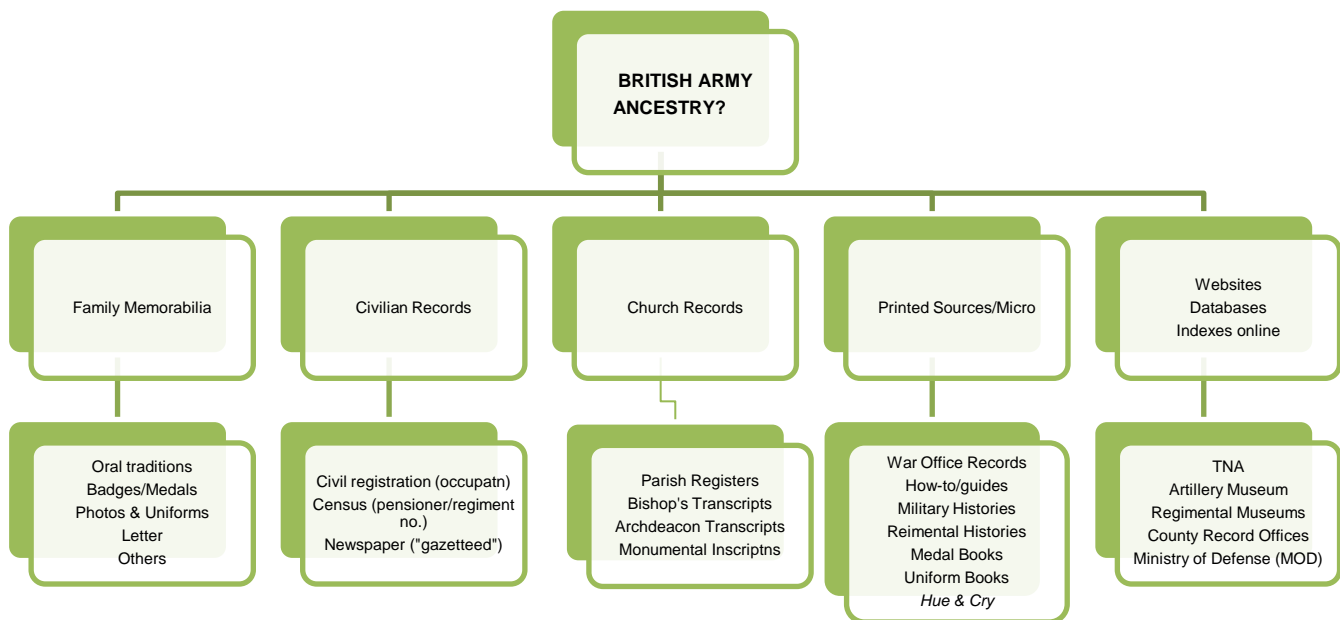
## Militia Records

Some tried militia life before enlisting in the army. Check in the FHLC under your county and the topic "Military Records" for individual militia lists, muster rolls, and other records for your county. Militia lists make great census substitutes. Some militia records are being digitized.

## Pensioners

Pensioned (before 1880 only about 10% of men)

- Pension by tenured stay of duty (usually 21+ yrs)
- Discharge to pension due to injury or casualty–
  1. Chelsea Out-pensioners
  2. Chelsea In-pensioners



The following strategies are based on research done at the Family History Library or a Family History Center and would be modified if the researcher could visit the National Archives at Kew.

## STRATEGIES FOR OFFICERS' RECORDS (GENTLEMEN):

1. Search Annual Army Lists (War Office 64-65;67) 1754-1940 to determine what regiments and what years he served. (FHL books & films, [www.thegenealogist.co.uk](http://www.thegenealogist.co.uk) covers 1806-1940)
2. Search W.O. 25:
  - a. Returns of Services of Officers on Full Pay – 1828 (FHL films; book abstracts)
  - b. Returns of Services of Officers on Full and on Half Pay – 1829 (FHL films; book abstracts)
3. Search W.O. 76 & W.O. 77—Records of Officers' Services 1771-1919 (FHL)
4. Search W.O. 42 –Applications for Pensions for Widows and Children of Officers 1755-1908 (FHL)
5. Search Gentlemen's Magazine if between 1731-1858 (FHL 942 B2g index, see [www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Gentlemans\\_Magazine](http://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Gentlemans_Magazine))
6. Fuller list at [www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/What\\_regiment\\_did\\_my\\_ancestor\\_serve\\_in\\_-\\_Officers?](http://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/What_regiment_did_my_ancestor_serve_in_-_Officers?)

## STRATEGIES FOR ENLISTED "MEN" (FOOT SOLDIERS):

1. An increasing number of army records are being indexed. Start by searching by ancestor's name at
  - a. Ancestry.co.uk: Muster Books & Paylists 1812-1817: <http://search.ancestryinstitution.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=60546>
  - b. The National Archives (TNA) – <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/SearchUI>. Then click "Advanced Search" for its catalogue; type-in i.e. WO97—then name
  - c. Ancestry.co.uk: Military Campaign Medals & Awards 1793-1949: see at <http://search.ancestryinstitution.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1686>
  - d. findmypast - [www.findmypast.co.uk/content/search-menu/armed-forces-and-conflict](http://www.findmypast.co.uk/content/search-menu/armed-forces-and-conflict).
  - e. FamilySearch – [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)
  - f. Ancestry – see list of databases at [http://search.ancestry.com/search/CardCatalog.aspx#ccat=hc%3D25%26dbSort%3D1%26filter%3D0\\*39%7C1\\*1652381%7C1\\*3257%26](http://search.ancestry.com/search/CardCatalog.aspx#ccat=hc%3D25%26dbSort%3D1%26filter%3D0*39%7C1*1652381%7C1*3257%26), primarily WWI time period, but several earlier records included.
  - g. The Genealogist – [www.thegenealogist.co.uk/coverage/military-records/#includes](http://www.thegenealogist.co.uk/coverage/military-records/#includes).
2. If Step 1 was unsuccessful, you must ascertain his regiment because the majority of records are arranged by regiment and are not indexed by individual soldier. The regiment may be found in a variety of records:
  - a. Prior to 1880, only about 10% of soldiers were discharged with a pension. Those who were discharged to a pension are in the "Soldier's

Documents" (W.O. 97). Between 1760-1854 W.O. 97 records are indexed at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue/search.asp](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue/search.asp) and at [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com). (FMP and FamilySearch index W.O. 121-122; 128, a good place to find pensioners.) If you find a record for your man in W.O. 97 (or W.O. 121, 122, or 128), the FHL has copies of some of these on film and FindMyPast has most in digital format online. From 1872-1915, Soldier's Documents are indexed on FindMyPast and at TNA (but actual images are available on FamilySearch and FindMyPast).

- b. Clues to Names of Units may be found in:
 

Family records	Old letters	Diaries
Pension Certificates	Obituaries or Death Certificates	Medals
Monumental Inscriptions	Birth & Marriage Certificates	Census
Family Tradition – "in the battle of" OR "stationed at"		Par.reg.
  - c. Did he have children while in the Army? Check --
 

[www.findmypast.co.uk/search/armed-forces/births](http://www.findmypast.co.uk/search/armed-forces/births) (1761-2005) or check the FHL fiche indexes listed at [www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/User:National\\_Institute\\_sandbox\\_6Wa](http://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/User:National_Institute_sandbox_6Wa) (None of these fiche circulate to FHCs). These include Army Returns of Birth, Army Chaplains Returns: births, Army Regiment Registers: births, and several smaller indexes.

    - i. Was he married while in the army? Check [www.findmypast.co.uk/search/armed-forces/marriages](http://www.findmypast.co.uk/search/armed-forces/marriages) (1796-2005) or check the FHL fiche indexes as described in iii, just above.
    - ii. Did he or a family member with him die while he was serving in the army? Check [www.findmypast.co.uk/search/armed-forces/deaths](http://www.findmypast.co.uk/search/armed-forces/deaths).
    - iii. Family papers of his discharge? Photos of him in uniform? War medals?
  - d. Explore other web sites such as [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk) for other military databases.
  - e. Check [www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/What\\_regiment\\_did\\_my\\_ancestor\\_serve\\_in-Soldiers?](http://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/What_regiment_did_my_ancestor_serve_in-Soldiers?)
3. Once you know the regiment, search surviving records for that regiment. A list and description of the various types of records are given at: [www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/British\\_Military\\_Records#Understanding\\_Military\\_Records](http://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/British_Military_Records#Understanding_Military_Records).

The FHL has a number of other W.O. records. To see what is available, do an 'author' search in the FHL Catalog for *Great Britain War Office*.

The National Archives (TNA) has many more W.O. records, such as muster rolls, pay lists, etc. where you will find regular soldiers who do not turn up in W.O. 97 or other records mentioned above. Some TNA records are imaged and available online, while most others can be ordered online once you obtain a TNA reference

number. Or, you may choose to hire a researcher to search records at TNA for you (go to [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/irlist/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/irlist/) to find a list of researchers by specialty), however you will still want to do whatever you can to ascertain the regiment before you hire someone.

There are many available army records and guides to help you know what the records will tell you about your ancestor. TNA has about 40 separate guides about army ancestors. To access these guides, go to [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/atoz/a.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/atoz/a.htm) and click on Admiralty (8 guides), Army (9 guides), or Army personnel (24 guides). Other guides are spread throughout other letters of the alphabet, so you may want to browse through the list of guides. Also, guides for personnel of other branches of the armed forces may be listed at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-person/default.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-person/default.htm).

A FamilySearch Research Wiki team wrote up British Military strategy. See at: [www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Did\\_My\\_Ancestor\\_Serve\\_in\\_the\\_British\\_Armed\\_Forces%3F](http://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Did_My_Ancestor_Serve_in_the_British_Armed_Forces%3F).

A list at [www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/British\\_Military\\_Records\\_Online](http://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/British_Military_Records_Online) attempts to show all British Military records online. This site has not been updated since June 2013.

## SOURCES

*In Search of the "Forlorn Hope": a comprehensive guide to locating British regiments and their records (1640-WWI).* John M. Kitzmiller. FHL British Ref 942 M2kj v. 1 & 2

- *Ancestral Trails*. Mark Herber, FHL British Ref 942 D27 hm, (Chapter 19 "Records of Military")
- *Family Search Research Wiki* - [www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/British\\_Military\\_Records](http://www.familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/British_Military_Records)
- *Army Records for Family Historians*. Simon Fowler, FHL British 942 M27f
- *A Register of the Regiments and Corps of the British Army*. Arthur Swinson, FHL British book 942 M2am